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OP-ED BANGLADESH MATTERS TO AMERICA

BY DAN MOZENA

As many already know, I care deeply about Bangladesh; I am greatly inspired by the Bangladeshi people; and I believe strongly in the bright prospects for this country's future as Asia's next economic tiger. My profound respect for Bangladesh drives me to share my views on the current political situation and why the major parties must redouble their efforts to find a solution worthy of the people of Bangladesh.

I believe the Bangladeshi people are firmly committed to democracy; they need and want elections that are free and fair and credible. Thus, I am disappointed that the major political parties have not yet reached consensus on a way to deliver such elections.

As I write, I see on television the frustration and fear of the Bangladeshi people as violence rages on the streets and in the villages of this beautiful country. The continuing political impasse has taken a horrific toll on the fabric of the nation. Human rights and other organizations report that more than 400 people have lost their lives to political violence in 2013. Countless others have been seriously and often permanently injured. Destruction of homes and livelihoods has touched every corner of the nation. The minority communities have been disproportionately impacted. A palpable fear now permeates society ... who next will be a target, witting or otherwise, is the question in everyone's mind.

How can the Sonar Bangla of Tagore's vision and of our shared dreams become reality in this context? The economy is reeling as farmers cannot market their produce or procure the seeds and fertilizer needed to plant their crops. Manufacturers cannot import needed raw materials and export finished products. Overseas buyers cannot place orders in confidence that products will be delivered in a timely way. Day workers go hungry for want of work as the political impasse stifles the economy. Students are frustrated as they cannot go to school; they cannot take their examinations ... how can we prepare the next generation if they cannot even attend school?

If this political stalemate continues, the economic situation can only get worse. A couple of weeks ago I led a delegation of prominent Bangladeshi businessmen to Hong Kong. Our mission was to deepen interaction with the many American and other businesses

based in Hong Kong, so Bangladesh could benefit from expanded trade and investment. The major apparel buying houses used our visit to deliver a tough message: each of the brands represented in the meeting had already crafted a strategy to exit their business from Bangladesh. Knowing that nearly half of the orders for Bangladesh's apparel exports courses through Hong Kong, my delegation and I were stunned by the powerful blow we had just received. Truly, the increasingly violent and destructive political impasse in Bangladesh packs potential to destroy a key sector of the Bangladesh economy.

This should not happen.

I believe most Bangladeshis want the same thing: To live peaceful, prosperous lives. They seek the means to provide their families safe, secure housing, ample, nutritious food, good healthcare, and quality education for their children. I don't think this is asking too much. After all, Bangladesh is a rich country, blessed with fertile soil, ample water, perfect climate for growing three crops, significant reserves of coal and gas, and a key geographical location as the nexus of the 21st century's great trade route, the Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor. Of course, Bangladesh's greatest asset is the people ... the most energetic, dynamic, hard-working, creative, generous, entrepreneurial, and resilient people whom I know anywhere in the world. Truly, Bangladesh could be and should be Asia's next economic tiger, which would lift millions out of poverty into middle income status, but the deepening political quagmire and accompanying savage violence are trashing the economy, as I noted earlier, leaving, I fear, the Asian economic tiger stillborn.

The Bangladesh that we all know and love has achieved so much. It has slashed child-under-five mortality and maternal mortality. It has built from nothing a massive apparel industry that is now the second largest apparel exporter in the world. Once dubbed a "bottomless basket," Bangladesh in fact has become an overflowing basket of agricultural bounty as the nation has already become rice self-sufficient and is well on its way to becoming food self-sufficient. These are amazing achievements, and I am proud that America has been Bangladesh's steadfast partner in supporting many of these successes.

The Bangladesh I know, the Bangladesh I believe in, does not want these remarkable gains to be lost, to fall victim to this political impasse. The mother whose son was injured on a derailed train, the child whose mother was burnt on a bus, every parent, daughter, and son whose life has been irreversibly impacted by the political impasse ... each is a Bangladeshi whose dreams, aspirations, hopes have been gutted at the altar of political ambition; each is a Bangladeshi who wanted only to get on with life and to take care of his or her family.

Elections offer an opportunity to demonstrate Bangladesh's commitment to democracy, an opportunity to fulfill the ideals won at the greatest cost in 1971, an opportunity to further build the future each and every parent dreams of for his or her children,

an opportunity to show the world that Bangladesh can be/will be the next Asian tiger and will take its rightful place on the global stage.

There is much to be done for that to happen, however. First and foremost, the violence must stop. Violence of any kind is not part of the democratic process, cannot be tolerated, and has to stop immediately. The people of Bangladesh, whether of the majority community or of the minority communities, deserve the opportunity to elect their national representatives in a climate free of violence and intimidation. The nation's political leadership – and those who aspire to lead – must ensure the peace and refrain from supporting violence, inflammatory rhetoric, and intimidation. The United States encourages all political parties and Bangladeshi citizens to participate peacefully in the political process. Violence subverts the democratic process.

Second, the major parties must resume their dialogue and redouble their efforts to resolve the prevailing political impasse. With a modicum of goodwill from each side, the leaders can find a way forward to free, fair and credible elections.

Third, all parties and Bangladeshi citizens, including civil society organizations, have the right to freely and peacefully express their views. The government is responsible to provide space for such activity. Equally, the opposition is responsible to use such space in a peaceful manner.

I write today because the United States and Bangladesh have a decades-old friendship based on shared interests and shared values.

I write today because Bangladesh's vibrant civil society, its development achievements, its successes in women's empowerment are models for the world.

I write today to celebrate the relationship between our two countries, which has never been broader, deeper and stronger.

I write today because America stands with Bangladesh; America is a friend of Bangladesh with a shared interest in the stability, prosperity, and growth of the country.

I write today because I care ... I care about the wonderful people of this great nation.

I urge the government ... I urge the opposition ... to seize the moment, to put the interests of the people first, to converge at the dialogue table with the will and commitment to find an agreed way forward to give the Bangladeshi people the elections they want, to give the Bangladeshi people the elections that they deserve.

An immediate, peaceful resolution of the current situation is essential ... it greatly matters to America, and it matters even more to Bangladesh.

The Op-Ed is written by U.S. Ambassador Dan Mozena

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